

A Blessed Church: *Matthew 5:1-12*

Norwalk Christian Church, November 2nd, 2014, All Saints Day, Proper 26, Year A. Sunday of 2014 Congregational Meeting.

The old hymn sings, “Count your many blessings, name them one by one.” We have a lot of blessings to be thankful for this time of year in Iowa. The beautiful autumn weather. The bountiful harvest. The cacophony of fall colors. And, while those things are tremendous, the blessing that we can be most thankful for this morning...is that on Tuesday, November 4th, the incessant election ads will be over! Can I get an *Amen*? I never thought I’d say this, but I’m looking forward to the return of the annoying car insurance commercials with talking Geckos and Flo.

It’s disorienting to read a text like ours today, in the midst of so much campaign negativity. Jesus, talking about all these people who are blessed...while every commercial break is filled with how people are cursed? Can you imagine what would happen if a SuperPAC got a hold of the beatitudes?

Cursed are the poor in spirit, for their values are destroying America.
 Woe to the peacemakers, for they don’t have the guts it take to ward off our nation’s enemies!
 Don’t vote for the meek, they missed over 50% of their committee meetings!
 A vote for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, is a vote to destroy our economy and bankrupt our nation!

It’s disorienting to read the beatitudes, and not just because we live in a swing state. We aren’t used to this blessing-talk, about others or about ourselves. It’s so easy to see all that is wrong with ourselves and our world. How could we be blessed?

Jesus’ language of blessing, especially the blessing of those who seem to be the ones least likely to be blessed, is foreign to us.

Perhaps that’s why we’ve turned the beatitudes into a list of commandments, things that we must do in order to earn blessing. If we’ve done this, it’s for good reason. Matthew, our Gospel writer, goes out of his way to make us think of Jesus as a new-kind-of-Moses. Here is this great teacher, standing on a mountain, delivering a new law to the gathered people, just like Moses did to the Israelites long before.

In this setting, the beatitudes look like a revised Ten Commandments, without the “thou shalt”. But even with their absence, we can still imagine them there.

“Thou shalt be poor in spirit.”

“Thou shalt mourn.”

“Thou shalt be persecuted for righteousness sake.”

In other words, if you want to be blessed, here's what you have to do to earn that blessing. Be more mournful! Have a purer heart!

Instead of feeling blessed after reading the beatitudes, we feel like more of a loser. Because I really could be more meek. And am I poor in spirit enough? I would really prefer to avoid persecution...but didn't Jesus say I should seek it out?

Go with me, back to your 4th or 5th grade English class. Way, way back, for some of you.

Way back then, we learned there are three moods to most sentences in the English language. Indicative, Imperative and Subjunctive. Do you remember the difference? I'll review, for those who had to go way, way, way back.

Indicative sentences are statements of fact. Like: Des Moines is the capital of Iowa. The Stanleys will be cold this winter. Indicative sentences can also be questions: Has Marti had her baby yet? Or How many deviled eggs will be served at our potluck?

Imperative sentences are commands: Eat your vegetables! Don't play in the street! Party like it's 1999!

Subjunctive sentences express a wish:

"May you live long and prosper."

Or make a conditional statement: "My head I'd be scratchin', while my thoughts were busy hatchin', if I only had a brain."

With that review, I give you a pop quiz: Which mood are the beatitudes? Indicative, Imperative or Subjunctive? Of course, they weren't originally written in English. They were written in Greek. But Greek has mood as well, and very particular ways of communicating that mood.

So, what is Jesus saying? Are these imperative statements: "Be mournful! Be pure in heart! Thou shalt be persecuted!"

Or are they subjunctive statements: "If you were meek, then you would be blessed and inherit the earth."

Or are they indicative statements, statements of fact: "You who are mournful are, right now, blessed." "The peacemakers are blessed people."

Which is it? Well, the correct answer: They are indicatives. Statements of fact.

Now, other than a helpful review of the English language, what is the point? The point is this: Jesus is not laying out conditions for blessing. He is not giving commands that, if obeyed, will earn blessing. He is simply calling people blessed. Stating facts.

The mournful are blessed, now. The pure in heart, right now, are blessed. The poor in spirit have the kingdom of heaven. All kinds of people, the ones whom the world would throw out, the last ones who would ever think they had anything going for them in life: you are blessed.

Not because you've earned it. Not because you're worthy of it. But simply because Jesus blesses you.

As ministers, when Marti or I meet someone who hasn't been to church in a while and they find out what we do, they often have a list of excuses and explanations: well, we often work on Sundays, or it's so hard to get the kids out of bed in time. They want us to know that they believe in God and pray and help others, even though they may not have stepped into a church for years.

The assumption is that God, and that we, as God's ministers, look down on them. Judge them. And that they have to prove that they are worthy of God's blessing.

It is so hard for us to imagine God looking at us and blessing us. But God as a lawgiver, doling out "Thou Shalts" and "Thou Shalt Nots", that we can picture. But a God who just gives out blessing, to the least likely to be blessed, without out condition...can you imagine it?

We imagine God looking at us, wishing we were something else. That God looks at our church, and wishes we were bigger and better. If only we were more committed, then we would be a more blessed church?

What makes a church a blessed church? Is the largest church in town the most blessed? The one with the nicest, newest Sanctuary? What makes a church blessed?

How do you earn God's blessing? Do you go to church every Sunday? Pray daily? Tithe? Serve others?

And then Jesus stands up on this mountain, and starts to preach. He has good news for us today. You, you who spend your life mourning, you are blessed! You, you who are so poor in spirit you haven't made it to worship in years, you are blessed! You, all of you, just as you are, **YOU ARE BLESSED.**

The unlikely and forgotten of the world. The down and out. The ones who spend their lives mourning. The meek and timid. The poor and poor in spirit. The ones with insatiable desires for righteousness. The peacemakers and the cheesemakers.

You are blessed. God is with you. God is proud of you. And if God is showing up where you are, God is showing up everywhere, showering us all with God's blessing.

Even though you may think you don't have the looks or the brains, you are blessed.
Even though you may think you are too old to be useful, that your best days are behind you, you are blessed.

Even though you may think you are too young, that you will will never live up to the expectations the world has on you, you are blessed.

Regardless of what you have, or what you can buy, regardless of what you do and what you earn, you are blessed.

Though we may not be the biggest, most popular church in town. Though our carpet may be stained and our sanctuary dated, we are a blessed church.

Accept God's blessing. Accept God's love.

You are the beautiful people of God. God created you and God delights in you. God is not disappointed in you. God is not cursing you. God is smiling at you. God loves you. God blesses you.

Believe the good news! Believe that you are blessed.

The song we are about to sing says, 'And now, let the weak say, 'I am strong.' Let the poor say, 'I am rich.' Because of what God has done in us.

"Give thanks, with a grateful heart."

Bless you, Church.

Bless you, Church.

And let us sing, number **528, Give Thanks.**